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Wisconsin's Image

A strong state brand is a powerful economic development tool

Page 18

Inside:

Regulation without Representation p. 5

Own the Future, an Editorial from Milwaukee Bucks President p. 12

Three Candidates Jockey for High Court Seat p. 28



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BRANDING



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WHAT DOES WISCONSIN MEAN TO YOU?

A Strong State Brand is a Powerful Economic Development Tool

By Mark Crawford

It's not easy to build a state brand. It must carry a simple yet unified message that rings true for both business and quality of life, on multiple levels. It requires serious long-term commitment, financing, leadership and collaboration among all key stakeholders, as well as the creativity and smarts to bring it all together in a single, resonant message. It must also be true – if the message is not authentic, or poorly designed, it will create confusion and doubt, sending prospective businesses and talented workers to develop their futures elsewhere.

A complete state brand reflects both economic development (Wisconsin is a good place to do business) and quality of life/tourism (Wisconsin is great place to live, work, raise a family, go to school).

Wisconsin's "business brand" has evolved dramatically over the last several years. "To many corporations and commercial real estate professionals, Wisconsin was never really in the conversation for significant expansions or investments undergoing a national search," says Tricia R. Braun, deputy secretary and chief operation officer for Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC). "Now, because of an aggressive campaign bolstered by regulatory and policy reforms, we have the attention of these critical audiences."

No audience is more attentive than site selection consultants.

"I am hard pressed to name a state that has done a better job of transforming its business

climate over a relatively short period of time," indicates John H. Boyd, principal with The Boyd Company in Princeton, New Jersey, a leading site selection firm that has also conducted research for several state branding campaigns. "This is very timely for the state, as we see huge opportunities for Wisconsin to benefit from the revival of U.S. manufacturing and reshoring trends in that sector."

Business climate is only one-half of a complete state brand – the other half is tourism and quality of life.

A recent survey by Longwoods International USA, a travel and tourism research group based in Bay City, Michigan, shows Midwestern consumers have a very positive attitude toward Wisconsin, especially for scenery, state parks, fishing, wildlife and fall colors. "In fact, Wisconsin ranked first as the place people would really enjoy visiting, ahead of its regional competitors Michigan, Illinois, Minnesota, Missouri, Indiana and Iowa," states George Zimmermann, chairman of Longwoods International USA and former director of tourism for Michigan. Wisconsin cities also consistently make Livability's top-100 list for best small- to mid-sized cities in which to live and work – another strong indicator of Wisconsin's highly ranked quality of life.

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For brand-making, the challenge is tying business climate and quality of life together in a single unified brand. The brand also needs to acknowledge the highly popular and more stereotypical views of Wisconsin, such as beer, cheeseheads and the Green Bay Packers – all strong “mini-brands” of their own that are deeply entrenched outside the state. “Wisconsin is known for its natural resources and attractive tourist destinations, but we still need to work collectively on expanding people’s perceptions of our state to include the many positive attributes beyond the beer and cheese for which we are famous,” says Kelly Lietz, vice president of marketing for WEDC.

“We cannot be ‘fearful’ of these perceptions of the state,” adds Daniel Nelson, president and CEO of Nelson Schmidt, a marketing firm with offices in Milwaukee and Madison. “In fact, we should embrace them. It’s our deep-seated culture of brewing beer, dairy farming and manufacturing that has led us to evolve to where we are today – being innovative leaders in water technology, energy and power, food and beverage, bioscience and other industries.”

BENEFITS OF A STRONG BRAND

A strong brand attracts not only robust economic development from outside state borders, but also top talent. Drawn by the high quality of life, outstanding academic institutions and innovative thinking in Wisconsin, out-of-state students will come here to get their education and hopefully stay and join the workforce, perhaps even becoming thought leaders in their fields.

“A strong state brand leads to more loyal businesses, more predictable revenue streams and greater economic stability, which create less pressure to compete with other states on tax credits or other incentives,” says Marsha Lindsay, CEO and brand expert for Lindsay, Stone and Briggs, an advertising firm in Madison.

Unified enthusiasm around a brand and its message can propel the state’s brand mission forward and create more efficiency and consistency across state agencies. “If the message is delivered with one brand platform in mind, and the state offers a complete package of being a great place to work, live and play, there is a cohesive message presented to the audience,” says Nelson. Although campaigns can be altered for different audiences – for example, attraction, talent recruitment, business retention, startup support – “if we can start with a unified brand platform,” he continues, “each campaign will shape and reinforce the perception we want to deliver.”

BUILDING WISCONSIN’S BRAND

Nelson Schmidt was hired by WEDC three years ago to build the state’s business brand. Early research identified Kentucky (Unbridled Passion), Michigan (Pure Michigan) and Wyoming (Forever West) as examples of states with fairly strong brands. Each state showed consistency and discipline in the management of the brand’s message, supported by the necessary infrastructure. However, after reviewing the brands of all 50 states, Nelson concluded that no state has developed a brand that does a good job of tying business and quality of life together.

Nelson and his team travelled across Wisconsin to see how the state is perceived by its residents. Interviewees identified strongly with the Green Bay Packer and beer themes. As Nelson developed what became the new In Wisconsin® campaign, he made it a point to acknowledge these strong allegiances in the overall economic development message. For example, beer was connected to Wisconsin’s strength in water technology and dairy/agriculture was linked to energy innovation and power control. “These deep, authentic identities within the state can be linked to economic development and managed at the state level through the In Wisconsin® brand,” says Nelson.

In Wisconsin® – introduced less than a year ago – has been effective in bringing attention to Wisconsin’s improved business climate. Now Nelson Schmidt is working with the state to possibly expand the brand to include tourism and quality of life. This would involve input from key stakeholders such as WEDC, Department of Workforce Development, Department of Tourism, Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection. “To make this work, however, there must be an ‘owner’ designated by senior management to oversee planning and implementation, such as a chief marketing officer,” says Nelson.

“Many perspectives must be taken into consideration and many stakeholders need to feel involved in the process in order for it to succeed,” adds Lietz. “The exercise is as much internally focused as it is targeted toward outside audiences. In the end, the goal is not only to clearly articulate positive differentiation, but also gain commitment from the entire economic development partner network to deliver on a singular, powerful promise.”





MOVING FORWARD

There is no question Wisconsin is headed in the right direction. Boyd indicates that health care, precision metalworking, engineered plastics, composites, energy, aerospace, autos, medical technology, food processing and other advanced manufacturing companies are looking closely at Wisconsin. “These are sectors that increasingly integrate new innovative technologies in both products and processes,” says Boyd. “The rate of technology adoption, and the ability to use that technology to remain competitive and add value, are defining measures for the advanced manufacturing sector.”

He also notes his clients are monitoring the fiscal conditions of states “like never before” – especially as they relate to unfunded pensions. “Wisconsin is being looked at as a model for pension reform,” continues Boyd. “Wisconsin’s Act 10, which reformed government employee unions, has enjoyed popular support from our clients.”

If crafted effectively, one brand will support both quality of life and business. The message can be shaped and molded for specific audiences. The brand can even extend to allow for a city, region or partner to highlight those attributes unique to it, while still connecting to the state’s overall brand. “It’s important to recognize that, if not done collaboratively, a region’s or city’s attempt at branding itself will fall short if there isn’t a thoughtful approach to connecting it to the state’s brand,” cautions Nelson.

Good branding allows a state to present the best version of itself to its target audience, but it must also not stretch perceptions beyond what is believable. Powerful branding is built upon uniqueness, which means one state’s brand promise should not be transferable to another. “No other state should be able to make the same claim,” says Lietz. “Also, a clearly articulated brand gives direction to those charged with delivering its value. They should know what behaviors are ‘on brand’ and what behaviors are ‘off brand.’”

Lindsay notes that Wisconsin needs a sense of urgency for developing its brand. “There are others who are already way ahead of us, marketing to millennials, venture capital firms and high growth sectors,” she says. “Whoever ultimately manages the project must be knowledgeable about best brand management practices and have the authority to build out on-brand programs. That person must also be immune from politics, changes of administration, etc.”

Ultimately, the benefits of a strong brand are not captured in a set of metrics, but rather by improved performance across all the state’s attraction, retention and growth strategies. It’s not only what a state says about itself, but also about how it proves those claims every day through its actions that creates new business opportunities. Powerful brands also produce marketing and operational efficiencies, driven by consistency and allegiance to a singular value proposition.

“Trying to be all things to all people is both exhausting and ineffective,” says Lietz. “In Wisconsin, we know who we are and we have a powerful story to tell about the ‘can-do’ attitude of our people that makes our state a great place to do business.” BV

Crawford is a Madison-based freelance writer.

The Future Wisconsin
ECONOMIC SUMMIT

Attend the Future Wisconsin Economic Summit
December 9 in Madison to share your input about the future of Wisconsin's brand

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